

subsequent falling off of Italian poetry from all the manly and truthful qualities which once formed its strength. Nor ought the examples of such men as Ariosto and Tasso, who, for a while, stood forth resplendent amid the symptoms of decay, to be opposed to these truths, because men, peculiarly gifted, will flourish on a system which is baneful to the multitude; and we should rather inquire what talents, like those of Tasso, might have effected had he treated his great Christian epic with a truly Christian and Gothic feeling, instead of resorting to pagan imagery to illustrate his Christian incidents,—a custom then so common as to be introduced by churchmen in their discourses. The writer was lately favoured by Mr. G. Rossetti, a son of the popular Italian poet, with some translations which he had made from the early poets before the time of Dante, wholly unknown in this country, as they are unappreciated in their own, and could not but wonder at the precocious genius of this people, exemplified in the exquisite tenderness, richness, and truth of these effusions of an age 150 years anterior to that of our Chaucer. What might such a race not have attained to, had their development been attended with less fortuitous circumstances?

Not to omit architecture (a subject to be delicately handled by one, not of the craft, writing to *THE BUILDER*), I must say that it might appear like sectarianism to complain of the change which, in this case, the love of antiquity has effected, great excellence having been arrived at in the Italian style, which in itself is well adapted to the beauty of the climate and materials there employed; while, on the other hand, the mission of Gothic architecture has been fulfilled in other countries; nevertheless, if we reflect on all the instances of fulsome interpolation and idiotic restoration for which the classical style is responsible, the numbers of basilicas, churches, and other noble edifices, which have either made way for it, or still suffer from its pitiless embellishments, if we consider the ignominious results to which it ultimately led, and all the handy work of the eighteenth century, exemplified in the churches of Rome and other cities, I might be allowed to revert with displeasure to the first order which Brunelleschi received from the Medici, to build a palace in the classic style, and lament the want of harmony which must have been felt on the introduction of this forerunner of an entire change in the character of Florence, for till then everything in it was Gothic, the houses, the pageantry, the tournaments, works of art and furniture, arms, and dresses, nothing was wanting to the uniformity of feeling. But a change was preparing for the scene, the wrench was already applied to the bars and fastenings that encompassed antiquity, and the past was revealed in all its splendour! The first to appreciate, this ardent people could not rest satisfied with admiration, but emulous, they must enter the arena to strive with the past at its own games; vain struggle with phantoms which elude the grasp!

But let us hasten from this delicate topic of architecture to the subject of painting, and submit it to the same train of reasoning. From the period when Giotto first impressed on the childhood of art the character of true pathos and dignity, up to the decoration of the Brancacci Chapel by Masaccio and Filippino Lippi, the evidence of one continual state of progression is afforded the archaeologist, unimpeded, as it was unassisted, by foreign influences. As perfection was not yet attained, we may justly infer, as well from this previous improvement, as from the necessity of art having risen, at some time, unassisted, that progress would not have stopped with Masaccio, but that, under equal encouragement, painting would ultimately have arrived at perfection, while from the quality of excellence displayed by that master, we may also conclude that the desired period could not be very far removed.

About this time the rage for disentombing antique statues began to show itself, and their influence to be felt. Andrea Mantegna, an artist who little awakens our sympathies, had already strongly imbibed the feeling; Masaccio was never influenced by it, but several of his

cotemporaries exhibit at times a feeble and even ludicrous effort to combine the drawing and costume of the old statues with design of a very different nature. In the meantime the rage for antiquity continued to gain ground; under the pontificate of Leo X., it had reached such a height, that in the words of the historian Roscoe, "he who could bring to light an antique bust, might consider himself provided with a competency for life, while the discovery of an entire statue was deemed equivalent in value to a bishopric." This fashion, like all others which combine novelty with a love of the beautiful, took strong hold on men's minds, till it became a passion and a creed. Now, it is not to be supposed that men like Raffaële and Michelangelo, would be loath to avail themselves of the impetus thus given, or the advantages it held out to them; none are so easily led as the inexperienced, and till then art had been in its childhood. What, in fact, did they want? they who, early inured to the severe study of nature, had imbibed the vital qualities of individuality and expression, which can be obtained from that source alone; they who had inherited a simple and pure taste from their predecessors; they who had surpassed them; what more could they require, if not a greater perfection in drawing, and a bolder outline? This was ready prepared for them in the works of antiquity daily brought to light, and is it to be supposed that, contrary to the spirit of the times, and incapable of foretelling the consequences, they should refuse the proffered boon, the ready chance of improvement, and devote themselves laboriously to extort from nature that which apparently lay beneath their grasp? The shortest route sufficed their purpose; they took it. Italian art reached its highest state of development, and the causes of its decline alone remain to be considered. It may be easily understood that these great men, in their reverence for those examples by which they had been enabled to outstep all previous efforts, would forget much of the gratitude due to those who had early directed their steps in the right way, of the numerous windings by which they had ascended the eminence, they were most likely to remember the last by which they had gained the summit, their admiration for the antique is known, but they forgot how little their works evinced of the study they so affected. The pupils and followers of these two painters, although they little noted their career, hoarded their precepts, and were little loath to carry them out: their masters had achieved what appeared to them perfection by the study of the antique, they would study the antique and their masters,—it was more expeditious than the study of nature, and each man by these means would become a Michelangelo: thus was the study of nature supplanted by that of art. The masters had strained the band that held them to nature to the utmost tension,—their successors broke it; and through all the phases of the decline of art, the less nature was resorted to, the lower the degradation, till general disgust brought about a reaction which now is beginning to bear fruit.

The review of sculpture in Italy would be little more than a repetition of that of painting in the same country,—gradual progression in the first attempts—sudden and fearful development under Michelangelo and antique influences—the abandonment of nature for the study of art, and consequent decay, with this difference, that it appears from the beginning to have been more dependent on the works of antiquity, and that it never reached a degree of excellence equal to that attained in painting by the Italians; and if we are to believe the words of an illustrious sculptor of our own country residing in Rome, "the Italians never were sculptors."

An opinion is now beginning to gain ground that Michelangelo was not quite immaculate as a sculptor; and that he who had gathered from the antique the true principles of art, displays in his works what might be better termed an exaggeration of some of the qualities of the antique allied to a wonderful knowledge of nature, but more of the painter than the sculptor. The impression which the writer received from his works in Italy was, that he was the Rubens of that country,—an opinion which he has since heard corroborated.

Before concluding, let us give a few exam-

ples to elucidate the view which is here taken of Italian art. Leonardo da Vinci flourished many years before Raffaële, although in his old age a cotemporary of that master, we may therefore expect to find less of the spirit of antiquity in his works, an assumption which they justify on inspection; nevertheless, in perfection, his individual figures are considered superior rather than inferior to Raffaële, that master only surpassing him in imagination and activity, which helps to prove that perfection would have been attained independent of antique examples. As an instance of how much artists deceive themselves, may be adduced the case of Raffaële, who being appointed to the conservation of the remains of antiquity under Leo X., conceived such an affection for them, that, writing to his friend Agostino Chigi, he complains of not being able to succeed with the head of his Galatea, because nearly all the old statues wanted heads; nevertheless, his claims to the admiration of posterity depend far more on the admirable character of his heads than the drawing of his limbs. As an instance of how much both he and Michelangelo owed to their predecessors, may be noticed the facts of their plagiarisms from the Campo Santo and the Brancacci Chapel. In support of the study of nature, there is the fact of Leonardo having in his latter days wasted much time running after models; and, finally, in support of that study being the strongest safeguard against decay, there is the example of Leonardo's pupils, one of whom, Luini, almost rivals the master, while all bear a better proportion to him than the followers of Raffaële do to their master: there is also the example of the Venetian school, which, from having more need of the aid of nature, as colourists, resisted longer the degeneracy of the times.

In the hasty sketch thus drawn of the effects of "looking backwards" in Italy, the object has been little more than to direct attention to the subject, and there was no room to take notice of individual cases, which may require explanation, nor has the writer pretension to do justice to such a subject; but wishes it to be understood that he confines himself to all that strictly relates to æsthetics, for necessarily the principles of ethics and positive science must be of equal value, from whatever source they may be derived. But as it would appear that whatever the Greeks knew of real science had already reached Europe through Arabian sources, to sum up, it may be asked—What was the real benefit conferred by this all-reversing revolution in mediæval æsthetics? Setting aside the preservation of some classic authors, the answer might be summed up in few words, a race of pseudo Latin poets, whom nobody reads, and a great amount of disputation on the Aristotelian and Platonic systems of metaphysics, and then with Lord Bacon all to begin afresh!

I will address my concluding remarks, with your permission, Mr. Editor, to our fellow-students in the plastic arts, and will beg not to be misunderstood with reference to the study of nature; her principles must be investigated, as well as her appearance imitated, and this is the point least understood at the present moment; for, since the excellence attained by the Dutch, many artists, looking at nature through the medium of Rembrandt or Sir David Wilkie, cannot persuade themselves that Leonardo da Vinci can be also like nature: to solve the difficulty, they denominate the latter high art, whereas, in point of fact, that master is as much an imitator of the generalities of nature as Teniers is of her particularities. For nature is the stay of the artist; she is our kind mother, and she will never desert us if we trust in her; seek her, and she will ever appear before you beautiful; question her diligently, and she will answer. She alone can reconcile the differences of conflicting schools, and by her sanction alone does the minister of every calling share the rewards due to fidelity,—Wilkie and Burns in the throng, with Michelangelo and Shakespeare. Let us, then, never neglect her worship for idols of wood and stone, nor, from a selfish motive, seek to obtain by stealth those merits for which we should labour honestly. Let us think of what we owe posterity; and while we take hand-in-hand the slow and sure road that leads to excellence—

"Learn to labour and to wait."

AN ARTIST.

* It has always struck the writer that classical buildings require a shrine to display them to advantage, whereas Gothic structures show best in gloomy weather.